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ABSTRACT

Accreditation of counseling services on college campuses is a relatively recent development. These areas are covered in accreditation standards: relationship of counseling center to college community; counseling service roles; ethical standards; counseling service personnel; related guidelines; and multiple counseling agencies. As public accountability continues to become more important and as the professionalism movement continues, one clear way to establish at least minimal standards for counseling services is for an agency to seek and achieve accreditation. (ABL)

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Accreditation of College and University Counseling Services

James I. Morgan

Professionalism and Accreditation

Accreditation of counseling services on college campuses is a relatively recent development. The only agency currently accrediting college counseling services is the International Association of Counseling Services, Inc. (IACS), which was the immediate successor to the American Board on Counseling Services, Inc., a unit within the American Personnel and Guidance Association (APGA, now the American Counseling Association). IACS was incorporated as an independent affiliate of APGA in 1972 (Morgan, 1986).

Accreditation of counseling services can be seen as a part of a larger concern with professionalism within the counseling community. Professionalism in the counseling profession has the following aims: (1) to protect the public welfare; (2) to improve the counseling profession, and; (3) to recognize that because the majority of counseling services offered are utilized on a voluntary basis by clients, counseling must be seen in a positive light if its benefits are to appeal to the consuming public and to all others to whom the delivery of service may be held accountable (Morgan, 1986). These aims are publicly expressed through the pursuit of certification, licensure and accreditation. Certification and licensure pertains to individual practitioners while accreditation is focused on programs and agencies.

Desirability of Accreditation

Accreditation is closer to the concept of certification than it is to the concept of licensure. That is, it is not necessary for a college counseling agency to be accredited to offer counseling services, but to go through the voluntary process of being evaluated for accreditation and becoming accredited means that the agency can say that it is recognized by an independent professional group as offering counseling services that comply with the standards set by that accrediting group.

Accreditation of college counseling services is not the norm among college counseling centers. Neither is membership in the most recognized professional group for counseling center directors. Also, participation in pre-doctoral internship programs approved by the American Psychological Association is pursued by only a fraction of existing counseling centers. The membership of the Association of University and College Counseling Center Directors (AUCCCD) consists of 353 member directors (AUCCCD, 1991). One hundred and twenty-nine college and university counseling services are accredited by IACS. Sixty-four counseling centers have APA approved pre-doctoral internships. Interestingly, according to information provided to the author (APA, 1991) by the IACS central office, 38, or 60%, of the centers with APA internship programs are also accredited by IACS. Why more centers are not involved with their professional organization or with accreditation is yet to be determined, but it assumed that, as all of these activities are voluntary, they do not yet see the need.

When directors of accredited centers were asked to describe benefits they perceived coming from accreditation of their counseling services, they reported, in descending order of frequency, that it: (1) added to their credibility, status, or image on campus, (2) helped to increase or maintain staff, (3) helped improve administrative understanding or support, (4) enabled them to use information supplied by the accrediting agency to support requests for additional resources, (5) provided political advantages, contributed to staff morale and was useful in public relations (Gallagher, 1985). Another benefit is that the applicants gain a more complete understanding of their agencies' strengths and weaknesses through participation in the intensive self-study required as a part of the application process.

The accreditation process consists of several distinct steps: (1) the center requests the application materials; (2) the center completes the application materials, which involves an extensive self-study related to the areas of concern to the accrediting group; (3) these application materials are reviewed by the accrediting group and a decision is made about the center's readiness for an on-site field visit; (4) the field visit is conducted and a report made to the accrediting group which then sends the report to the center director for a response; (5) the field visit report and the director's response to the report are reviewed by the accrediting group and a determination is made about the status of the applicant center. A center may be denied accreditation, given provisional accreditation for a limited time with the expectation that the staff work toward making changes which will make it fully accreditable, or the center is granted full accreditation. This complete process may take from 10 to 18 months to finish.

Accreditation Standards

The most recent accreditation standards for university and college accreditation are not yet published. They are available from the International Association of Counseling Services, Inc., offices in Alexandria, Virginia. However, they are similar to the previous guidelines for accreditation used until October,

1991, and published in the Personnel and Guidance Journal in 1982 (Garni et al., 1982), and those were revisions of even earlier guidelines. Professionalism recognizes that standards evolve and are not static; hence, the periodic revisions. The following areas are covered in the accreditation standards (Kiracofe et al., 1991):

A. *Relationship of counseling center to the university/college community*—which focuses on the center's administrative independence, its financial support as well as it's relationship to other units within the institution.

B. *Counseling service roles and functions*—which defines the services which must be present for a center to be considered for accreditation as well as defining parameters within which these services should be offered. Training is also dealt with here.

C. *Ethical standards*—which refers to the expected level of professional ethical behavior which must be adhered to by the center and staff in the provision of counseling services, research, treatment of records, testing and other professional activities.

D. *Counseling service personnel*—which refers to the qualifications, duties and competencies of the director, professional staff, support staff, trainees and paraprofessionals.

E. *Related guidelines*—which covers staffing practices, professional development of staff, staff size, workload, compensation, and physical facilities.

F. *Multiple counseling agencies*—which defines when an agency with multiple locations must seek accreditation as one unit or as multiple units.

The Future of Accreditation of Counseling Services

The art of predicting the future is probably best left to seers; however, it may be reasonable to speculate about the future of accreditation of counseling services.

There is some reason to believe that the popularity of, if not the necessity for, accreditation of counseling services will continue to grow. Certainly there is a continued emphasis on professionalism within the counseling profession. The American Counseling Association has formed a Coalition for Preparation and Practice Standards in Counseling and Student Affairs Practices (CPPS) (Guidepost, 1992). This group, consisting of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), the Council on Rehabilitation Education (CORE), the Council for Advancement of Standards (CAS), and the International Association of Counseling Services (IACS), is meeting to encourage the review, development and endorsement of standards of preparation and practice in counseling and personnel services and to support the accreditation of programs and credentialling of individuals. CPPS intends to encourage coordination of accreditation efforts, to provide a forum for the study and review of standards and to educate various publics.

And, although the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) has published standards for all student services areas, some counseling centers find them too marginal for their purposes. The California Counseling Center Directors agreed, for instance, to adopt the IACS standards as minimum standards for university counseling services practice, feeling they were more appropriate, and more rigorous, than the CAS standards (Aiken, 1985).

Conclusion

As public accountability continues to become more important and as the professionalism movement continues, one clear way to establish that at least minimal standards for counseling services are being offered is for an agency to seek and achieve accreditation.

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